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Child Participation in Early Childhood Education from the Perspective of Female Students Specialising in Preschool and Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

This article addresses the subject matter of child participation in decision-making, events and social or civic activities at the early childhood education stage from the perspective of female students at a Polish university. This study aimed to explore and analyse the opinions of female students preparing to become teachers for grades 1–3 in primary school, focusing on their perspectives regarding child participation while utilising Roger Hart’s “Ladder of Children’s Participation” concept. In this qualitative study, a semi-directed, problem-oriented focus group interview was conducted, followed by a content analysis of the data obtained. Female students at a large university in a medium-sized city in Poland were invited to participate in the study. The study depicted that they equated the process of developing skills related to participation, understood as involvement in society, with formal education. Their responses were dominated by approaches related to full participation, while other views indicated a lack of confidence in implementation of full

participation at the early childhood education stage. These concerns, *inter alia*, include the presumed lack of developmental readiness of children, as well as the requirements that prevent the creation of a participatory environment (compulsory core curriculum). As the analysis of the study programme of future female teachers, conducted as a context, has shown, issues related to child participation have been dealt with marginally, which needs to be corrected.

Keywords: child participation, female students' opinions, early childhood education, pedagogy, qualitative research.

Introduction

The current problems threatening democracy in public discourse, such as pervasive populism, conspiracy theories, xenophobia or fake news (Wieviorka, 2022, pp. 369–414; Westheimer, 2017, p. 18), as well as the presence of complex economic crises and wars, emphasise the urgent need for its implementation in society, especially for educational practice conducted in a country whose democracy has been characterised as “flawed” (EIU, 2021). This is relevant to not only those commonly considered mature enough to understand the concept of democracy but also the youngest members of a community. It is known that if one has to function in this system, one must follow the rules. Therefore, individuals, including children, cannot be placed in a ready-made framework of the democratic structure (Walejewa, 2018, pp. 93–96), but should rather be encouraged to actively engage and participate in democratic decisions. The aim of the study was to explore and analyse the opinions of female students preparing to become teachers of grades 1–3 in primary school regarding child participation, using Roger Hart’s “Ladder of Children’s Participation” concept as the analytical framework.

Active citizenship of an individual

To better understand the purpose of participatory action, the issue of citizenship must be explored. Contemporary theories describe the issue in varying ways. Gierszewski (2017, pp. 23–24) believes that this category, despite numerous approaches, is always intrinsically linked to the activity of individuals,

including everyday human behaviour, the vision of the citizen and the type of community. On the other hand, Lewicka (2004, pp. 65–82) proposed two types of civic activity: spontaneous and organizational. This division can be applied to both adult activity and that of children or school children. However, educational institutions play a key role in facilitating organised civic activity. According to Westheimer and Kahne's (2004, pp. 3–5) concept, three types of active citizens exist:

1. personally-responsible citizens, whose activity manifests itself in the community through actions such as litter picking and donating blood;
2. participatory citizens, whose activity is understood as active participation in events at the local as well as national level; and
3. justice-oriented citizens, whose activism aims to seek systemic change.

Civic activity, understood as social activity aimed at being a good citizen of a democratic state, is a concept that combines many forms of activity, including participation (Klamut, 2013). Therefore, the act of participation became the focus of the authors' interest, which, enriched by the educational context, made it possible to conduct the study presented in this article.

Child participation in an early childhood context

Participation – understood as involvement in decision-making, events and social or civic activities – can refer to electoral participation and political, social or civil activism, depending on the concept adopted (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, pp. 239–241; Westheimer, 2015, pp. 472–473; Kopinska, 2019, p. 152; Kopinska, 2020, pp. 172–173). In the context of this article, it is worth defining full and apparent participation. The authors define full participation as actions characterized by awareness, independence and initiation by the individuals themselves. On the other hand, apparent participation includes three of the degrees of power participation listed by Hart: manipulation, decoration and tokenism. Therefore, it refers to little awareness, self-reliance and self-initiative in taking action. The focus of this paper is on children's

participation in education, specifically in preschool and early childhood education. The subdivision of the different degrees of child participation according to Hart's ladder of participation was not relevant to the study. The authors wished to obtain a general viewpoint of female students who had yet to attend thematically related classes in formal education. It was crucial to establish the features of participation that dominated the students' responses as well as the type of participation (i.e., full or apparent) they indicated. According to the Council Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems (EU Council, 2019), creating a participatory environment should be one of the objectives guiding the design of early childhood education. Such an environment requires conditions that enable children's participation in not only formal situations but also everyday social practices (Heikka et al., 2022, p. 2).

The full participation of children is particularly significant today, as it serves as a prerequisite for the democratic process to take place effectively. However, it is frequently questioned whether a child can be considered a legitimate, active (or able to be active) citizen. The prevailing argument is based on the assumption that the developmental stage of young individuals does not allow them to make conscious or rational decisions and take action (Espinoza and Egido, 2022, p. 141). At the preschool stage, it is possible to discuss the development of management functions responsible for planning, initiating and directing goal-oriented action, namely activities essential for full participation. The early childhood stage is characterised by moral relativism, wherein a child perceives both the consequences and the intentions of an individual's actions (Kielar-Turska & Kołodziejczyk, 2011, pp. 219–250), as well as the reversibility of thinking and decentration, i.e., the ability to adopt varying perspectives (Matczak, 2003, p. 76). The early school age period also includes the ability to consciously solve problems (Matczak, 2003, p. 223). Evidently, during the early childhood education stage, it is not possible to speak of the attainment of moral autonomy – which, according to Kohlberg's theory of moral development, occurs between the ages of 13 and 21; however, it should be noted that consensus orientation, a skill necessary for the participatory process, can develop much earlier (Kohlberg, 1984; Buksik,

1997, pp. 160–162; Snarey & Samuelson, 2014, pp. 64–69). Psychological and biological approaches are not the sole means of explaining the concept of child development, and there is growing recognition of the significance of socio-cultural concepts. The main assumption in these concepts is the dependence of the formation of an individual's traits and behaviours on the sociocultural context, family and the school environment (James & James, 2004, pp. 18–19; Garbula & Kowalik-Olubińska, 2012, pp. 26–27).

Despite the passage of many years, Hart's (1992; 2008) ladder of children's participation remains one of the few concepts addressing the degrees of children's participation in decision-making and action. The ladder of eight rungs focuses on the degree of participation in power. The first part refers to apparent participation, expressed through manipulation (i.e., adults using children to endorse their behaviour under the guise of acting with the intention of the children's well-being); decoration (i.e., using the children's endorsement while refraining from creating the appearance of child inspiration); and tokenism (i.e., giving the children a voice but not taking it into account). The next levels include assigned but informed; consulted and informed; adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people; young people-initiated and directed; young people-initiated and directed; and young people-initiated, and shared decisions with adults (Organising Engagement, n.d.; Brzozowska-Brywczyńska, 2013, pp. 46–47).

Nevertheless, Hart's concept has also been criticised in the literature. In his conception of levels of participation, Treseder (1997) and Brzozowska-Brywczyńska (2013, pp. 48–49) point out that participation is not a hierarchically occurring process. They further state that not all children can engage in the design of activities on their own unless they have been prepared to do so beforehand. This is difficult to disagree with, as development varies for each child and involves, inter alia, the acquisition of further skills (Klus-Stańska, 2015, pp. 15–17). Moreover, children may not be sufficiently prepared to participate in activities that involve the attributes of full participation, as indicated on the higher degrees of Hart's ladder. However, this cannot be considered an excuse for depriving children of the opportunity to make decisions and cooperate with adults. Hart (2008) critically reflected on his work years later and argued

that the children's model of participation refers largely to organised rather than everyday activities while focusing too much on the role of an adult in a child's activities (Hart, 2008, p. 20). Despite the criticism, Hart's model was adopted as a reference in this study, as the respondents were female students specialising in preschool and early childhood education. The selection of this group was critical for the authors as the perspective of future female teachers also applies to adults who – due to their future profession – are likely to associate it with organised action precisely in a school setting when referring to children's participation. For this reason, Hart's model was considered a good point of reference.

Researchers working on participation in the school context mainly consider schoolchildren, teachers and students as their study sample (Haraldstad et al., 2022; Correia et al., 2019, Zyngier et al., 2015; Espinoza and Egido, 2022). There are a growing number of studies in Poland that partly address child participation (Kopińska, 2019; Brzozowska-Brywczyńska, 2021; Zalewska-Królak, 2020; Jarosz, 2020; Nowicka, 2019) and highlight the shortcomings in its implementation; however, no studies depicting future teachers' understanding of child participation in Poland were found. The non-Polish context was addressed by Leek (2017) who sought to define the way teachers from England, Cyprus, Italy and Lithuania understood participation. Their knowledge was intuitive and primarily related to civic competence and becoming active in society (Leek, 2017, pp. 163–165). A study conducted by a team of researchers from the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń (Kopinska and Solarczyk-Szwec, 2017; Kopinska et al., 2021) illustrated that issues related to participation in the core curriculum (including those for early childhood education) included a marginal dimension. Nowicka's (2019) study, on the other hand, makes it possible to conclude that the actions conducted by teachers at this educational stage inhibit the child's autonomy required in the context of participation. The available literature mainly focuses on the perspective of adults, i.e., parents and teachers. Therefore, the apparent omission of the children's perspective needs to be highlighted.

Methodological assumptions of the study

In this study, female students specialising in preschool and early childhood pedagogy at a major Polish university were selected and added to the analysed group. This may be cognitively interesting since this field of study has recently gained a new form and dimension of implementation in the Polish higher education system (Ministry of Science and Higher Education, 2018). Consequently, the curriculum for the education of future teachers differs from the previous curriculum. Heretofore, studying preschool and early childhood pedagogy was conducted as first-cycle and second-cycle studies. In 2019, the course was standardised in terms of curriculum and duration of study (currently five years), which was motivated, among other things, by concerns among academics regarding the excessive diversity of the teaching faculty at Polish universities (Skrzetuska, 2022).

The aim of the study was to explore and analyse the opinions of female students preparing to become teachers in grades 1–3 at the primary school level regarding child participation, utilising Hart’s “Ladder of Children’s Participation” concept as the analytical framework. The research questions are as follows:

1. How do female students define participation and child participation?
2. At what age is child participation possible according to respondents? What is their justification for their answer?
3. In the opinion of female students, does the social-emotional development of the child at the early childhood education stage (age 7–9) enable full and aware participation? How do they justify this?
4. Which degrees of Roger Hart’s model of children’s participation can be reconstructed from their statements relating to their school experiences and self-images as teachers?

To answer question four, it was necessary to look for elements in the statements of the female students surveyed that fit into the definitions of the individual analytical categories referred to in Table 1.

The study was conducted with a qualitative research approach, which, among other things, enables the understanding of the studied phenomenon (Rubacha, 2008, p. 19). This provides a valuable reference to the data obtained for analysis (Kvale, 2010, p. 11).

The individuals comprising the analysed group were selected in two stages. In the first stage, purposive selection was applied. The criteria defining the framework narrowing the study area within which respondents were sought included university, field of study, period of study, and gender (Loboeki, 2006, p. 180). The authors wished to study people currently preparing to work at school with students aged 7–9; therefore, the chosen field of study was preschool and early childhood pedagogy at a large Polish university situated in a medium-sized city (over 100,000 citizens). Another criterion was the period of study, and the participants were expected to feel comfortable with the space and the subject matter of the study; hence, no consideration was given to selecting first-year students as they may not have previously attended classes related to the issue of participation. This enabled to test the actual knowledge and not the one acquired during the course of study. This would not be possible in case of female students in subsequent years. The group of male and female students in the second year of preschool and early childhood pedagogy was, therefore, the most accurate. The final criterion for target selection was gender. The available literature depicts that the professional group of teachers, including early childhood education, is a group with a high rate of feminisation (Piróg & Wiejaczka, 2020). Due to the dominance of women in the teaching profession, the selected respondents for this study were female. Another factor that influenced the selection of women was a similar study conducted by Kochanowska (2017) on a group of female early childhood education teachers, which studied female teachers' sense of participation in educational change. The results depicted that the majority of female students described their participation as subordination ('in line with the role prescription'). Given that children's participation can be perceived by female teachers through the prism of their own professional and educational experiences (Ferenz, 2018), it was decided to investigate the perspectives of future female teachers while they are still preparing for their profession. Six female students

were selected from second-year students specialising in preschool and early childhood education using a sampling without replacement mechanism. This measure was to ensure that each female student in the pre-selected group was equally likely to participate in the study. Moreover, it was also a request from the students – in their opinion, random selection could guarantee the participation of people with different levels of knowledge in the interview. The selection of the group was also motivated by the assumption that future female teachers might – despite the marginal treatment of the issue of participation in the core curriculum (Kopińska & Solarczyk-Szwec, 2017; Kopińska et al., 2021) – pursue participatory practices as part of an informal programme.

Before undertaking the research study, the curriculum followed by the selected group of female students was analysed, as well as the syllabuses available on the University's USOSweb Study Support System, which provided insight into the context in which they operate on a daily basis. Only two subjects were enrolled in the five-year master's degree programme, the syllabus of which directly addresses the issue of child participation. This represents approximately 1.5% of all teaching activities. However, it is possible that the issue of participation is discussed in other subjects and is part of the informal curriculum, but the publicly available data (including the full subject description and learning outcomes) do not allow this to be ascertained.

Through the chosen method of data collection, which was a semi-directed, problem-oriented focus group interview, it became feasible to select participants for the study from a pool of individuals who were acquainted with each other and functioned within the same environment. This allowed the authors to gain insight into the personal views and opinions of the female students, which in the future may influence their behaviour as teachers, and which they might not have revealed during the study in a larger group (Rubacha, 2008, pp. 133–148). It was decided to conduct only one interview in a single case study because the selection criteria applied in the first stage (i.e., specific university and year) significantly limited the number of potential respondents. To conduct a comparative analysis between several focus groups, it would be imperative to alter the initial criteria of the study, which may be done in the future. It is also worth mentioning that no study on the topic of child

participation has been conducted on the group selected by the authors to date. This article can form the basis for future research, where similar cases can be replicated and further investigated (Kozuch & March, 2014).

The reference point for the analyses conducted in this study includes the degrees of child participation proposed by Hart (1992; 2008). After considering the literature on the subject (Hart, 1992; Brzozowska-Brywczyńska, 2013; Jarosz, 2017; The School for Leaders Foundation, 2017), they were assigned the meanings as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Analytical categories relating to Hart's degrees of participation (1992) employed in the study along with definitions

Analytical Category	Definition
Manipulation	The use of children by adults to endorse their actions under the guise of inspiring the child in the creative process, e.g., involving the child in participating in a demonstration that he or she does not understand.
Decoration	Using children to support activities presented to them by adults without creating the illusion of child inspiration, e.g., participating in a performance to celebrate a holiday whose meaning children do not understand; children's performance on the occasion of a conference organised for adults.
Tokenism	Apparently allowing a child to speak but not taking their view into account, e.g., the activities of school and class councils ignoring their demands in reality; the Children and Youth Parliament, where children and young people are allowed to express their opinions but their demands are not considered or addressed.
Assigned but informed	Children can apply to take part in an adult-led activity; they understand the importance of their activity and adults respect their perspective, e.g., organising a school play where pupils can decide on the details themselves.
Consulted and informed	Genuinely taking the children's opinions into account in planning the activity, giving feedback on how the opinions influenced the final decision, e.g., consulting the school council on the ideas for the Children's Day and informing them of the decision made; presenting the objectives to be achieved in class and consulting on the ways to achieve them; informing them of the final decision while considering how the consultation influenced the decision.
Adult-initiated	The activity is initiated by an adult, but the children's views are taken into account in its implementation, e.g., the teacher initiates the creation of a class newspaper, but it is the pupils who decide if they want to do it, how they want to do it and participate in its creation.
Young people-initiated and directed	Children initiate the action and decide on the outcome; adults have a supporting role, e.g., initiating social actions.
Young people-initiated, shared decisions with adults	All stages of the implementation of the activity take place on the initiative of the children, who can decide to invite adults to join in, such as flipped classrooms.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Hart (1992); Brzozowska-Brywczyńska (2013); Jarosz, (2017); and the School for Leaders Foundation (2017).

Following the focus group interview, the interviews were transcribed, the data were organised and categorised, the content was analysed, and the results were described and interpreted. The data have been anonymised and the names of the female students have been replaced with S1–S6 designations. A triangulation of researchers was employed (Flick, 2012). The participatory aspect of the study was executed by involving the female students surveyed in assessing the veracity of the conclusions. To this end, an anonymous document with a short content was created, in which the interpretation and conclusions of the collected data were presented and sent to the women participating in this study. The feedback received allowed us to conclude that the analysis had been carried out correctly.

Findings

Based on the data obtained from the focus group interview, a diagram was created as a graphical representation of the process of grouping the relationships perceived in the analysed material (Diagram 1). It includes the main categories of interest to the researchers and the situated codes corresponding to each category.

In the context of the notion of child participation, the study revealed that the interviewees possessed some knowledge about it; however, this knowledge appeared to be produced on associative grounds. The women interviewed had never previously encountered the concept of child participation. For this reason, after hearing their statements, the facilitator provided them with a definition of participation (referred to in the section, Children's Participation in the Early Childhood Context). The study depicted that female students link child participation to the child's presence in society in a broad sense, defining it as the child's subjective presence in the space of social functioning (parts 1, 2, 3 and 4). However, they mainly indicate two approaches to child participation: the aspect of making the child aware of his or her identity as a social individual, and the area of active action related to the child and his or her causative power:

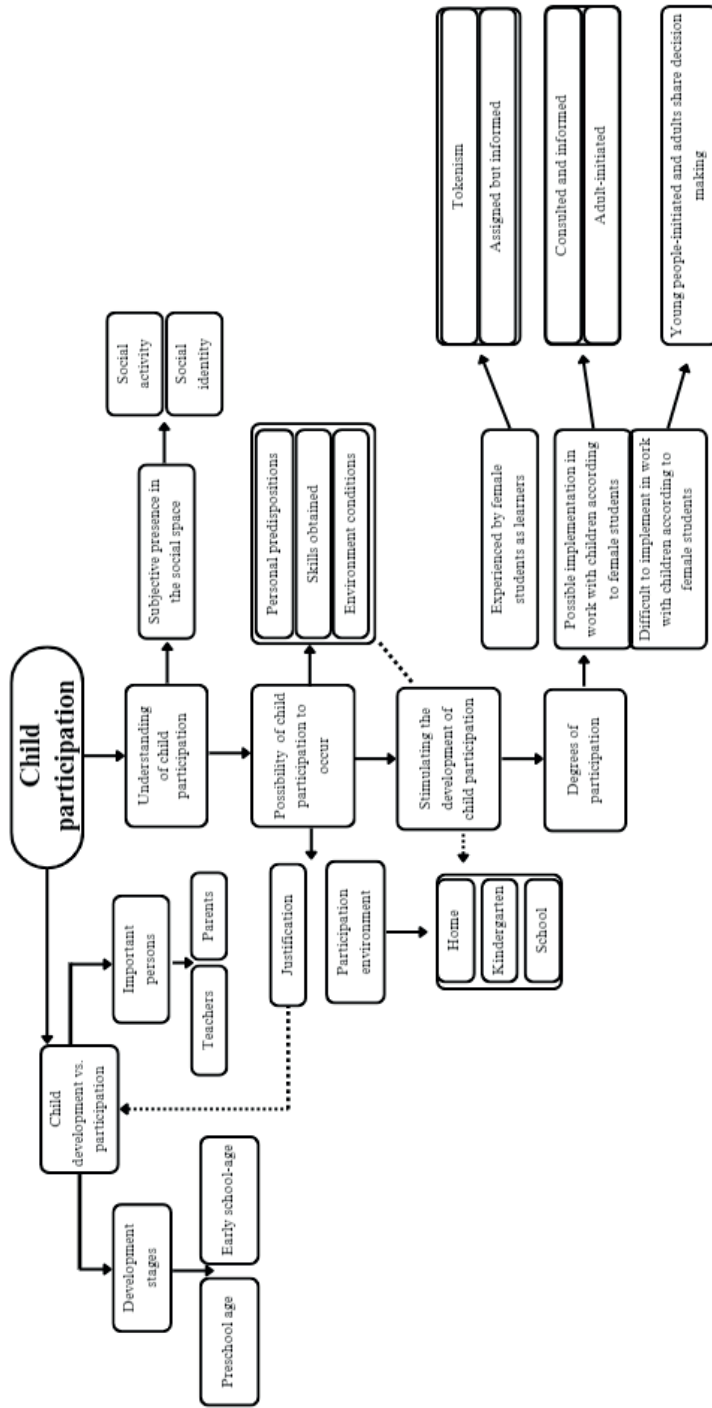


Diagram 1. Child participation in female students' perspective

Source: Authors' elaboration.

1. “[Child participation is – authors’ note] the participation of children in society. I associate it, I don’t know why, with such manifestations... For example, it’s a bit of a manifestation of this kind of behaviour of society towards the child and the child towards society.” (S1)
2. “It’s taking part in something.” (S5)
3. “All in all, maybe it’s just some kind of getting kids involved in some kind of social actions, something like that.” (S2)
4. “[Child participation is – authors’ note] finding themselves (children) in society... Making them aware that they are nevertheless part of society; it’s also how they see themselves among people.” (S3)

According to the respondents, child participation is possible at preschool age. They justify this on the basis of the child’s personality predispositions and skills, such as openness to different perspectives and experiences, cognitive curiosity, the need for independence, autonomy, confidence, and the desire to be active and take action.

- (5) “[Child participation – authors’ note] is already possible here... If there are toy days in the nursery, then children themselves have a choice... what toy they are going to take and what toy they are going to play with in kindergarten.” (S6)
 - (6) “For example, when somewhere the parents are dressing and preparing the child to enter kindergarten, they can give the child the choice of wearing such a T-shirt, or for example, some adornment other than what the parents suggest or something they feel comfortable in that day...” (S1)
- Researcher:* “So you think participation is possible from preschool age?”
“Yes, that’s right.” (S1)

Indeed, the preschool age is associated with the child’s independent decision-making, communication and imaginative development, which promotes planning and improves the satisfaction of one’s needs and the realisation of goals (Brzezińska, Appelt, & Ziółkowska, 2016, p. 164). Therefore, it can be assumed that child participation is already developing at this age.

Furthermore, according to sociocultural concepts, the acquisition of competences in childhood is dependent on the context (James & James, 2004, pp. 18–19; Garbula & Kowalik-Olubińska, 2012, pp. 26–27), which is evident in the statements provided by the interviewees. They note that the shaping of decision-making situations by the immediate environment paves the way for child participation. The interviewees believe that the social-emotional development of the child at the early childhood education stage enables full and aware participation, believing that the child can make their own decisions about developing interests, extra-curricular activities and establishing social relationships.

- (7) “Well, really, in relationships too, as if they [children – authors’ note] have a choice, because they don’t have to become intimate with everyone around them, they can just choose for themselves. Who they just have a better relation with and want to get closer to each other.” (S2)

In part (7), the respondent cites an example of a child’s decision regarding choices made at the level of social relationships. It is an informal activity initiated by the children and falls within this stage of child participation, which is referred to by Hart (1992; 2008) as *initiation and realisation by children with adult* participation. In their statements, the students also draw attention to the child’s developmental environment, including the family. According to the participants, caregivers have a significant influence on the development of child participation. They indicated general rules for implementing it in everyday life, such as allowing the child to make decisions and choices. They also draw attention to the prevention of participation by parents; in this context, there is a suggestion to change the approach of carers by making them aware of the child’s developmental capacity to stand for themselves:

- (8) “[...] the parents and such close family try to limit this [child participation – authors’ note] in some way, because instead of giving choice in such small things, so that the child feels singled out; the parents choose for the child themselves and prevent the child from making decisions

themselves. Well, the child could decide something small on their own, but the parents restrict this and decide for the child, they kind of lock them in such a snow globe a little bit.” (S1)

- (9) “[...] maybe it also depends on the awareness of parents, because there are still a lot of people who think that children don’t have too much to say and won’t do too much, and if you make parents aware that children are really very open and they really see a lot, understand a lot and think a lot, then that’s just the same... These children will be able to influence more things.” (S2)

The respondents also provided examples from the school space within which participatory activities were possible, including classroom décor, co-creation of teaching or art activities, integration time and outings, election of a class representative, dispute resolution and decision-making for children. Two distinct themes emerged during the conversation regarding their active involvement in the school. The first was about children’s participation based on the experiences of female students, while the second was about participatory activities that they thought were possible to implement in schools. Although the authors did not initially plan to address the participatory experiences of the female students in the interview, the statements made by them ended up serving as a contextual backdrop for their current views. Situations from women’s educational past mainly represent apparent child participation. Other responses were in line with Hart’s concept of child participation (1992; 2008) in *tokenism* and *informing*. *Tokenism* refers to situations initiated by students or parents who did not receive the approval of the teaching staff, and whose right to speak and willingness to be heard was only apparent:

- (10) “Students and parents very often also sometimes suggested, for example, to go out somewhere and do something or to set up just such a culture, but it was often met with a bit of a... With such discouragement [...] it was a question of whether the headmistress would agree [...] they encouraged such home-breeding, not at school.” (S1)

According to the female students, the distanced attitude of adults towards the child's participation may be due to prejudice, lack of or limited trust, fear, and insufficient willingness to give up control and allow children to be independent and responsible for their actions. However, it is imperative to remember that teachers play a significant role in the lives of their pupils (Brzezińska et al., 2016, p. 230). Contrary to the students' earlier assertions, one can conclude that children at the early childhood education stage do not have the opportunity for awareness and full participation. The statements testify that their emotional and social development allows them to do so, while the environments in which they function restrict them, especially in the didactic area, over which the children have little control:

- (11) "There are already in early childhood education; however, certain frameworks that we have to fulfil in all of this and the children just don't even know exactly what they have to do yet, so here it's hard to give them that much free will after all." (S2)

Concerning the above issues and the students' school experiences, there is uncertainty towards children's competences at the early childhood education stage:

- (12) "[...] it's worth directing them a little bit, because in general, children also need this kind of direction, because they can't do it on their own, if you give them total freedom, they just get lost." (S2)

As already indicated, the second area of statements regarding children's active participation in school depicted concern about how the participants would like to implement children's participation in their future work. In their statements, references to several rungs from Hart's concept were discerned. One of these is *Consulted and informed*, and statements specific to this category appeared most frequently. The participants had a willingness to talk actively and were open to comments:

- (13) “[...] it’s worth asking them [the children – authors’ note] about a task, for example, how they imagine it could be done in a different way or how they would like it to be done, it’s worth pointing out to them that well from this core curriculum we have to do it, but if you don’t like how I have planned it, then maybe you have a suggestion for me and then we can come to some agreement together.” (S2)

Although the female students had not yet started their careers, they pointed out the need to follow the core curriculum and comply with external requirements, which seems consistent with Kochanowska’s (2017) research. Hence, the question arises – if such an attitude appears not only in professional work but already at the stage of preparation for the profession, is it the result of the reproduction of the role at university or perhaps a general idea of how to function as a teacher that women have encountered outside the walls of the university (for example, in media discourse)?

Statements describing situations fitting in with *adult-initiated*, in which the teacher would be the initiator of the activity but would hand over further decisions of implementation to the pupils, appeared almost as often as those concerning *consulted and informed*. Behaviours fitting into the category of being *young people-initiated and directed* manifested, inter alia, in the ability to make decisions independently in the area of peer friendship, were mentioned least frequently. The respondents reflected on stimulating the development of child participation and specified various activities that make this possible: allowing the child choice, creating space for goal-setting and activity, and experiential learning.

- (14) “[we should – authors’ note] simply allow them to speak, to listen to their opinions and feelings, so that it’s not just that they are such recipients of everything and everything is totally imposed on them from above, and they are just there to do something [...] and they are also just ordinary people who should have some, at least... feel that they can have some influence on any given situation.” (S5)

Regarding their school experiences, the female students' statements were dominated by descriptions of behaviour characteristic of apparent participation, whereas in the area concerning their ideas about fostering the development of participation in future work, the concept of full participation dominated. This discrepancy may be the result of a reflection made on their own education, which may not have been a sufficient space for women to shape participatory practices.

Summary and conclusion

This study aimed to explore and analyse the perspectives of female students preparing to become teachers of grades 1–3 in primary school regarding child participation by utilising the perspective of Hart's "Ladder of Children's Participation" concept as the analytical framework.

The study focused on the students' opinions on child participation at the early childhood education stage by second-year preschool and early childhood education students. The students defined child participation as a child's subjective presence in the space of social functioning with the following two approaches: making the child aware of his or her identity as a social individual and active action related to the child and his or her causative power. The respondents stated that child participation is possible at the start of preschool attendance, equating it with the start of formal education. However, they noted that its occurrence and development depend on personal predispositions, skills and environmental conditions. The early school stage, on the other hand, is a period where a child's social-emotional development undoubtedly enables full and aware participation (Kielar-Turska & Kołodziejczyk, 2011, pp. 219–250; Brzezińska et al., 2016, p. 165). However, some doubts arose regarding the feasibility of creating a participatory environment, such as the need to implement and conform to an externally imposed core curriculum, which seems to be consistent with Kochanowska's (2017) study on a group of active female early childhood education teachers. Nevertheless, the participants were aware of their obligation to create conditions of empowerment for the children and understood that involvement in decisions would influence the

children's lives (Chouhan, 2013, p. 275). In their responses, the female students provided examples of behaviours characteristic of almost all rungs of Hart's ladder of child participation (Hart, 1992; 2008). However, a certain regularity was observed: regarding their own school experiences, apparent participation prevailed in the respondents' statements, whereas in the area concerning their ideas about fostering the development of participation in their future professional work, the image of full participation prevailed.

While the study primarily focused on prospective female teachers, the authors also dedicated attention to the surrounding contexts, including the current university environment in which the female students functioned at the time of the study. As the analysis of the study programme at Polish university showed, issues related to children's participation have received marginal attention. Perhaps the issue of participation is also discussed in other subjects and is a part of the informal curriculum; however, the publicly available data do not allow this to be ascertained. Interestingly, the same university, in the curriculum for the pedagogy course,¹ has already included subjects that address the issue of participation: *civic education* and *anti-discrimination education*. Hence, the following question arises: Do future preschool and early childhood education teachers have less need to understand civic education topics, including participation, than future school educators? This appears rather controversial, especially considering the rather poor core curriculum for early childhood education in terms of civic competences (Kopińska & Solarczyk-Szwec, 2017; Kopińska et al., 2021). It may be necessary to analyse the curricula of preschool and early childhood pedagogy at other universities in terms of issues related to participation and citizenship. The involvement of male and female specialists in the above areas can result in increased awareness among future teaching students. On the other hand, it should be borne in mind that the standards for teacher education do not allow for the free creation of study programmes (MEiN, 2021). However, the ministerial document refers to this aspect in the area of supporting the development

¹ The school educator in Polish schools is, inter alia, responsible for organising and supervising psychological and pedagogical assistance.

of preschool and early school-age children: the graduate (of preschool and early school pedagogy – authors’ note) knows and understands: “the student’s participation in the monitoring and evaluation of his or her knowledge and skills.” Despite this, a clear disproportion in the educational standards exists between the number of learning outcomes relating to social competences and those related to other areas, which is perhaps the reason for the insufficient reference to participation and requires corrective action not at the university level but at the ministerial level. This requires, as with the potential modification of education programmes, a broad public consultation that considers the views of not only male and female academics but also education practitioners who can assess the shortcomings of the formal education received.

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